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SOME UNDISTINGUISHED NEGROES

MR. J. H. LATROBE, corresponding secretary of the Maryland Colonization Society and later President of the American Colonization Society, has left the following story :

“It was while I was reading in the same room with General Harper that there entered one day a tall, gaunt, square-shouldered, spare, light mulatto, who announced himself as Abel Hurd. He was a Bostonian by birth, and a seaman by profession. In a voyage to the East his vessel had been captured by the Malays, and he alone, if I recollect rightly, escaped death, owing to his complexion. He had a varied fortune ; had at one time been in Cochin-China, again in Tibet, and, after passing some twenty years in the East, had returned to America, and was looking out for employment. Some one had heard how deeply interested General Harper was in Africa and African colonization, and had sent Hurd to him. About this time there was a great doubt as to the mouth of the Niger ; whether it was to be found at the bottom of the Bight of Benin, and whether it was not identical with the Congo, or Zaire, south of the line. This was a question in which General Harper was interested, and he determined to fit out Hurd and send him northward from Liberia until he struck the river, which he was then to follow to its mouth, and I was deputed to superintend the outfit.

“Hurd’s idea was to take as little baggage with him as possible, and to rely upon the resources of his wit and ingenuity in making his way among the interior tribes. He had had a vast experience, and he directed his own equipment. I do not recollect all that he was furnished with, but I recollect having devised a hollow cane, in the top of which was a compass and the tube of which contained papers and pencils. These were to be resorted to when the compass and materials openly were lost. I think I wrote, at General Harper’s dictation, a letter of instructions. Had Hurd lived and succeeded, he would have anticipated the Landers, Richard and John, who explored the Niger in 1832–34. He arrived safely in Liberia, and made several short excursions into the interior, but he had a theory that it was necessary to train himself for the great journey. Abstinence was a part of his training. It was a mistake. He took

the acclimating fever, and, although he recovered from the first attack, he had a relapse brought on by some imprudence and died.”¹

CHARLES H. WEBB.—During the years when the American Colonization Society was preparing to establish a colony of freedmen in Africa, it early became evident that the mere transportation of the blacks to their native home would mean little in establishing them in life. It was, therefore, necessary to organize schools in which Negroes desiring to be colonized could be trained in agriculture, mechanical arts and even in the professions. Among the first to qualify in the field of medicine was Charles H. Webb. In his examinations he exhibited evidences of ripe scholarship and much proficiency in his chosen field. He set sail for Liberia in 1834, after having completed his medical studies, which he had pursued under the direction of the American Colonization Society for a number of years. In the following autumn, however, he fell a victim to the local fever aggravated by some imprudence on his part and died before he could render his people much service.²

A SHREWD NEGRO.—A Kentucky slave, named Jim, with the humiliation of slavery rankling in his breast, resolved to make an effort to gain freedom. At last the opportunity came and he started for the Ohio River. There he told his story to a sympathetic member of his race, offering him a part of his money, if he would row him across to the Indiana shore. He was directed to George De Baptist, a free man of color, who was then living in Madison but removed soon afterwards to Detroit, Michigan. The master of the slave arrived in town with a posse and diligently searched it for the Negro. His sympathizers contrived, however, to avoid the slave hunters and the fugitive was conducted through the corn fields and byways to a depot of the Underground Railroad. He rested a few days at the station kept by William Byrd, of Union County, Indiana. From that point he was speedily forwarded northward until he reached Canada.

Appreciating as he had never done before the real value of freedom, he longed to do something to confer this great boon upon his wife and children whom he left behind him in Kentucky. He soon found a way to solve this problem. He said to himself, “I’ll go to old Massa’s plantation, and I’ll make believe I am tired of free-

¹ Semmes, John H. B. Latrobe, pp. 140–142.

² *The African Repository*, X, 104, and XII, 18.

dom. I'll tell old Massa a story that will please him; then I will go to work hard and watch for a chance to slip away my wife and children."

His master was greatly surprised one morning to see Jim return home. In answer to the many questions propounded to him, he gave the explanation which he had planned. He told his master that he found that Canada was no place for Negroes, and that it was too cold and that they could not earn any money there. He spoke of how the Negroes were cheated by the whites and subjected to other humiliations, which made him tired of his freedom. His master was very much pleased with the story, spoke pleasantly to him and permitted him to work among his slaves and those of his neighbors as a missionary to convince the blacks of the folly of escaping to Canada.

The slave resumed his usual labor, working during that fall and winter but planning at the same time a second flight. In the spring he succeeded in bringing together his wife and children and a few of his slave friends on the Indiana side of the Ohio River. He reached the first station of the Underground Railway with his party numbering fourteen and hurried them from point to point until they reached the home of Levi Coffin in Indiana. They were hotly pursued and had narrow escapes, but by wise management they made their way through Spartansburg, Greenville and Mercer County, Ohio, to Sandusky, from which they crossed over to Canada.³

B. F. GRANT.¹—I was born in the State of Pennsylvania, Little Britain Township, Lancaster County, Sunday morning, August 12, 1838. I am the son of the late Henry and Charlotte Grant.

My father was born a slave in the State of Maryland in Cecil County. He was freed at the age of nineteen, upon the death of his master. My mother was born of free parents in Harford County, Maryland. Both came in their youth to Pennsylvania, where they were married. Of that union there were born twelve children, eight boys and four girls. The subject of this sketch was the fifth son of the family.

In 1844 my father moved with his family from Lancaster to York County, across the Susquehanna River. I was then between five and six years old.

³ Coffin, *Reminiscences*, pp. 139-144.

¹This personal narrative was secured from B. F. Grant, of Washington, D. C., by Miss Mary L. Mason.

The first political event that I remember was the Presidential campaign of Henry Clay and James K. Polk in 1844. In the fall of that year each party had a pole raising at Peach Bottom, York County, Pennsylvania. Mother took us to see the pole raising and then the people were all shouting for Henry Clay, but soon after that I remember hearing them singing a song::

“Oh poor cooney Clay,
The white house was never made for you
And home you better stay.”

Polk was elected, and soon after the inauguration of President Polk in 1845 the great controversy over the Mexican War and Negro slavery arose. The Negro question was the topic of the day, both in and out of Congress and among all classes. This continued until in 1846, when the war broke out between the United States and Mexico, and lasted two years.

When it was over the United States had the victory. Then the slaveholders of the South, with the copperheads of the North, tried to force their slaves or their slave influence into every State and territory of the United States. So great became the agitation and excitement that the poor slaves became restless and uneasy over their condition, and they commenced to run away by the thousands from the Southern States. They made for the free States and Canada. This gave rise to what was known as the Underground Railroad.

This brings me to consider what I call my boyhood days. Having passed my childhood, I now began to think, feel and consider that I was a human being as well as the white boys who surrounded me, living on farms just as I lived. Therefore I began to believe that I had the same God-given rights that they had, and was not born to be kicked around like a dog any more than they were.

About this time I began to attend the so-called public school. I well remember those school days, for they made a lasting impression upon my mind. If God had not had mercy on the poor little Negro who attended the public school of Pennsylvania in those days, I know not what would have become of me; for the poor white trash from the teacher down had no mercy upon him. They were upon him like vultures upon their prey, ready to devour him at any time for any cause.

I will mention only a few things which the little Negro had to endure, simply because he was a Negro. He was not permitted to

drink from the same bucket or cup as the white children. He was compelled to sit back in the corner from the fire no matter how cold the weather might be. There he must wait until the white children had recited. If the cold became *too* intense to endure, he must ask permission of the teacher, stand by the fire a few minutes to warm and then return to the same cold corner. I have sat in an old log school house with no chinking between the logs until my heels were frost-bitten and cracked open. Sometimes we had a poor white trashy skunk that would sit in the school room and call us "niggers" or "darkeys." If the little Negro got his lesson at all, he got it; if not, it was all the same.

For seven long years, 1844 to 1851, my father lived about five miles from the Maryland line and about one mile from the Susquehanna River. That is where I saw some of the evils of the institution called slavery. Sometimes I wondered whether there was any God for the Negro.

My father was one of the members of the Underground Railroad. I well remember some of the members of that club which used to meet at our house. They were Robert Fisher, Lige Sarkey, Isaac Waters, Henry W. Grant, Isaac Fields, Thomas Clarke and others who used to meet and make their arrangements to convey the fugitives across the Susquehanna River. The night was never too dark or the storm never too severe for those brave, noble-hearted, courageous men to do their work. They did not fear death. Although they were uneducated men ignorant of the letter, they were directed by a Higher Power. The hand of God led them, and so they succeeded in carrying off hundreds, nay I might truthfully say thousands from the counties of Cecil, Harford and Baltimore. All lived to be old men.

After the Mexican War the Southern slaveholders and copperheads of the North got it into their heads to extend slavery throughout the borders of the United States. Robt. Toombs, one of the noted fire-eaters of the South, said he would call the roll of his slaves at the foot of Bunker Hill Monument. In 1848 came the crisis of the Presidential election. The Mexican War was over and the country had a vast amount of territory added to her southern borders. The cotton gin had been invented, and cotton had come into great demand. It was as good as gold. The Negro, therefore, was in great demand.

Presidential nominations were made. The Whigs nominated Gen. Taylor, and the Democrats nominated Lewis Cass. The Whig

candidate was successful. While Gen. Taylor was a Southern man, he was somewhat opposed to the extension of slavery, and, therefore, not a favorite of the nullifiers of the South. He did not live long. Then they got their dupe, the Vice-President, Millard Fillmore, a northern man, but a red-hot copperhead who stood in with the South. I can well remember those times when all the fire-eating leaders of the South and the poor dirty trash of the North got their desire when that poor dupe of a President allowed the mischievous fugitive slave act to become a law of the land. This law was a curse to the nation, an outrage upon the poor Negro and suffering humanity. This bill gave the poor Negro no protection in the land of his birth, a country boasting of being the land of the brave and the home of the free. These terms, however, were nothing but bombast; they would just come and take a freeman and carry him into absolute slavery without judge or jury.

I can well remember the Christiana riot. I was not living far from there at that time. Those were the days that tried the poor Negro's soul, and were a disgrace to the white man. I was then about fifteen years old and we had to suffer everything but death, and sometimes that; for the slave hunters were like their blood-hounds, always upon the Negro's track. There were daily riots between the slaves and Negro hunters.

While quite young, and claiming to be a Christian, too, I was almost ready to say with Job, "Cursed was the night wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, there is a man child conceived." My disgust at the treatment given my people made me resolve to leave the country and to go to Liberia, Africa, because the fugitive slave law was too obnoxious for me both in principle and practice. Because of the outbreak of the Civil War, however, I failed to carry out this plan.

Now I recall my third Presidential election. The candidates were Gen. Winfield Scott and Franklin Pierce. Pierce was the Democratic candidate and he overwhelmingly defeated Gen. Scott, which placed the Democrats in absolute power. All the fire-eaters of the South with the copperheads of the North held full sway, arrayed against the anti-slavery party of the North and East, and backed by the President, the Supreme Court and Congress. The world knows the condition of the country at that time. The Negro's condition during all of that administration recalls to my memory a picture too dark to attempt to describe.

During this administration there was a man by the name of

Dred Scott, owned by an army officer named Emerson. He took Scott into a free territory; this slave, Scott, sued for his freedom; the case was carried from court to court until it reached the Supreme Court, which handed down that opinion known throughout the world as the Dred Scott decision. It meant that a Negro had no rights that a white man was bound to respect; that he was of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relation; and so far inferior that they need not be respected, but might be reduced to slavery for the white man's benefit. This decision placed the damnation seal on the poor Negro in the United States. It left him absolutely without help.

In 1856 opened the great political drama. The candidates were James Buchanan, the Democrat, John C. Fremont, Republican, and ex-Vice-President Millard Fillmore, of the Know Nothing Party. James Buchanan, the Democrat, was elected; the world knows the consequences of the next four years in and out of Congress. Death and destruction were in the path. We had John Brown's insurrection, the Christiana riot, the tragic death of Lovejoy, and hundreds of other events which I cannot mention at this time.

In 1860 the Presidential campaign came off. The candidates were Abraham Lincoln, Republican, John C. Breckenridge, Southern Democrat, and S. A. Douglass, Northern Democrat, with John Bell, Union Democrat. This was a hot contest. Lincoln was elected.

Then came the Great Rebellion. On April 12, 1862, in company with my brother, John H. Grant, we left our home in York Co., Pa., for Washington, D. C., then the center of war activities. Both of us found employment as teamsters in the Quartermaster's Department. On June 15 we were transferred into Gen. Pope's Army in Virginia. We were relieved of our teams and put to herding horses and mules throughout Gen. Pope's campaign. After Pope was defeated at the second battle of Bull Run, I returned to Washington and went back to driving my team. In 1863 I was transferred to the woodcutter department as an outside clerk and put to measuring wood which was cut every two weeks. I also looked after the commissary. I was there until the Confederates ran us out in June.

I returned to Washington, D. C., and began my Christian and literary work. I was converted sixty-five years ago, and joined the A. M. E. Z. Church, then called Wesley Church. Rev. Abner

Bishop was the pastor. The church was in Peach Bottom Township, York County, Pennsylvania.

I have been always a lover of the Sunday School work. My interest continues to this day. There is one little incident in my Sunday School work which I will relate. When I was a boy, with another young boy like myself, we found that our Sunday School needed some literature. We succeeded in collecting some money, and Moses Jones and I found that the nearest place to get the books was Lancaster City, about twenty-five miles from the church. Undaunted, we took the money and walked to Lancaster, and back again with the books. Some of those books remained a great many years in the library of that school.

I am the man who opened the first free school to colored boys in the District of Columbia. This was in the basement of the old Mt. Zion Church in 1863 under the Friends' Association of Philadelphia, of which Mr. H. M. Laing, of that city, was president. I also opened a school to freedmen in Fairfax County, Virginia, at Bull Run. After being there about three months, one of the Freedmen's Bureau Officers came over from Manassas and placed me and my school back under the direction of the Friends' Association and the same Mr. Laing was still its president. I remained there two years.

When I opened the school it was a little log cabin built as a headquarters by the Confederates. They were encamped there in the spring or rather the winter of 1861-62. While I was teaching at Bull Run, Prof. John M. Langston was appointed to a position in the Freedmen's Bureau. I became acquainted with him, interested him in my work and he secured me one hundred and fifty dollars to assist in building there a house for two purposes, a church and a school. In this school I gave the founder of the Manasses Industrial School, Miss Jennie Dean, her first lessons. Now after the lapse of fifty years, the Bull Run School is still standing as one of the public schools of Fairfax County, Virginia.

While teaching in the Bull Run School I was elected a delegate to the first National Negro Convention after the Civil War. This met in the Israel Church, Washington, D. C., in 1868. This church was then A. M. E. Zion, but now C. M. E. There I met some of the leading Negroes of the world. Among them were Hon. Frederick Douglass, Prof. John M. Langston, Rev. Henry H. Garnett, C. L. Remond, Robert Purvis, Geo. T. Downing, Geo. B. Vashon, Rev. Wm. Howard Day, Prof. Bassett, Robt. W. Elliot, Bishop

Henry M. Turner, Prof. Isaac C. Weaver, Richard Clarke, John Jones, Prof. O. M. Green, Geo. W. White, P. H. Martin, John R. Lynch, and A. R. Green. These were some of the lights in that convention. Hon. Fred. Douglass was elected president, with Rev. H. L. Garnett as vice-president.

After two years at Bull Run, I returned to the District of Columbia, where I became acquainted with a white gentleman named Edmond Tewney, from the State of Maine, who came to the District as one of the founders of Wayland Seminary. As there was some misunderstanding between him and some of the other members of the faculty, he left the school, and organized another, known as the National Theological Institution for the Instruction of Young Colored Men and Women for preachers and teachers.

I became associated with that school, and was an assistant teacher and a pupil at the same time. It was a Baptist institution, and some of those who afterward became the most able Baptist preachers in the city attended that school. Some of them were Rev. John D. Brooks, Rev. James Jefferson, Rev. Edward Willis, Rev. M. J. Laws, Rev. J. M. Johnson, Rev. Henry Lee, and many others who did great good for God's church and for suffering humanity.

I will return to my church and Sunday School work in the District of Columbia and its vicinity. I was the Church Clerk for Union Wesley A. M. E. Z. Church for twenty-five years, and the superintendent of its Sunday School for thirty years.

I have been acquainted with all the bishops of that Church and a great many of its leading elders since I joined the church in 1853, sixty-five years ago. Some of the worthy prelates and leaders who have been my warm personal friends are: Bishops J. J. Clinton, J. J. Moore, C. C. Petty, C. R. Harris, J. W. Hood, J. W. Smith, J. Logan, J. W. Small, and Elders J. Harvey Anderson, Geo. W. Adams, Thos. Betters, R. J. Daniels, R. S. G. Dyson, and many others who have gone from my mind at this writing. I have had much of joy and happiness in my church life.

I am still in the Master's service. I am at present District Sunday School Superintendent of the Washington District of the Philadelphia and Baltimore Conference of the A. M. E. Z. Church. On August 12, 1918, I was eighty years old.

MARY L. MASON.